

Educational inclusion of Roma people: The Romanian policy approach, in an European context

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Abstract—Every child's right to proper education represents nowadays an axiom. The importance of education in the personal development and its benefits for the social inclusion of an individual were analyzed, conceptualized and put into practice as priorities in every state of the EU. One of the permanent challenges that stands at the basis of the social integration of Roma population remains the approach used for enhancing their educational inclusion, so the questions that we ask and try to answer to are: What makes a strategy "good"? What makes it "viable"? Based on the analysis of the current Romanian strategy for Roma educational inclusion, we have drawn up the features that give an educational policy targeting the Roma population the potential to be acknowledged as successful, effective and viable.

Keywords—Educational inclusion, Educational policy analysis, Roma inclusion, Romanian strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE social integration of Roma minority represents, for almost two decades now, a high priority for the European Union (EU). Developing targeted strategies towards the social insertion of Roma citizens is, at the same time, the moral and the financially smart thing to do [9]. According to some official estimates [1], Roma population is represented in Europe by 10 - 12 million individuals. Most of them, though EU citizens, are still confronted in everyday life with social exclusion and discrimination on all levels: education, employment, healthcare and living conditions [21], [23], [24]. Under the pressure of the EU to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria established in 1993, the governments from Central and South-Eastern Europe have initiated programs and measures for improving the general situation of Roma residents [22], [25]. For some of these governments, these were the first attempts to develop solutions for the challenges that the Roma communities faced for hundreds of years [21]. However, because the elaboration of a strategy does not necessarily guarantee its implementation, the Roma population that lives

in these states (and represents more than 70% of the entire European Roma population) is still the most socially and economically disadvantaged minority [22, 28]. Due to this lack of consistent progress in achieving a decent level of living conditions in their own countries, a large number of Roma ethnics have chosen to migrate to other areas of the EU, especially to Western countries. This phenomenon was noticed especially at the end of the last decade, when the context of the financial global crisis revealed, for the low qualified citizens in the destination countries, a new perspective about the potential competitive position where they were placed because of the presence, in their countries, of the newly migrated Roma population [24]. This, added to some other social factors, related to phenomena such as xenophobia, clash of cultures etc., and also political factors as the rising of the Europe's far right, has led in the recent years to an increase of anti-Roma and anti-Gypsyism sentiments, rhetoric and manifestations, in many EU countries. This had led, at EU level, to a re-confirmation of the need for strengthening the policy and legislative framework focused on enhancing social inclusion of vulnerable groups and increasing protection against racism and racial discrimination for all EU citizens [24].

Among all the European states, Romania stands out as the country with the largest population of Roma residents, estimated somewhere between 500.000 (official data, collected during the 2002 census) and 2.000.000 (estimations of non-governmental organizations and researchers focused on the topic of Roma) [2], [16]. This is one of the reasons why the study of policies and practices addressed to Roma social insertion had been very popular for a long time in Romania.

The experts on the topic [2] have identified three main stages in the history of the post-communist Romanian social policies addressed to Roma insertion: the first stage (named "the unstructured search period") took place between 1990 and 1995 and was characterized by policies and programs aimed rather towards exploratory steps that led to understanding of the mechanisms necessary for coherent social interventions. The intervention programs implemented during this period shared the same exploratory goal as the policies that generated them. The second stage (named "the period of responsibility understanding"), that took place between 1996 and 2001, was characterized by the development of more specific strategies, measures and interventions, designed and implemented both

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by public institutions and non-governmental organizations. The third and last stage, which started in 2001 and still runs currently, is defined by the undertaking of responsibilities by the relevant authorities in order to provide responses and solutions to a difficult situation which is continuously increasing.

The current paper addresses this third stage, with a focus on the educational policies targeting the Roma population and the specific measures developed based on these policies. The third section in particular is dedicated to a critical analysis of the current Romanian approach regarding the national priorities and directions in enhancing the educational inclusion of Roma children.

II. ROMA'S POPULATION ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN EU AND ROMANIA

Even if relevant and reliable statistics on Roma population in general is scarce [21], [22], [28] and data on educational attainment and outcomes even more so (mainly due to the lack of ethnically differentiated data), there are some aspects and information that have been clarified, proven and generally agreed upon about the educational situation of Roma minority in EU and Romania [3].

The first and most important aspect relates to the *generally low educational attainment level of Roma people*, as shown in most of the studies undertaken. Studies and surveys conducted in various European countries [4], [5], [26], consistently show low percentages of Roma graduates at all levels of formal education, especially upper levels (depending on the country, it is estimated that between 0,3% and 2% of Roma population hold a university diploma). Different surveys of the Roma population residing in Romania [6], [7], [8] show low levels of educational attainment (34-35% high school graduates and 2-3% university graduated), completed with high levels of illiteracy (25%).

The second important aspect relates to *significant differences between the educational level of Roma and non-Roma citizens*: a World Bank analysis from 2010 [9], that concentrated on four ex-communist countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania and Serbia) showed that less than 20% of the Roma adults had attended secondary education, compared to 75% of the non-Roma population. In Romania, a similar study [8] showed that, for the age group 18-30, only 9% of Roma residents are high-school graduates and 2% are university graduates, as compared to 41%, and, respectively 27% of the non-Roma population. The same study shows that 11% of the Roma children aged between 14 and 17 are out of school, as compared to 3.2% of the non-Roma population in the same age group [8]. In Romania, a Presidential Report from 2007 shows that "about 80% of the children that never enrolled in school are Roma, out of which 38% are functionally illiterate. The proportion of Roma children enrolled in primary education is 64%, as compared to 98.9%, the national average" [13].

The third important aspect concerns the *low school-enrollment and high school drop-out rates among Roma population*. In Italy, the data from the Ministry of Education

show that, in the 2007/2008 school year, only an estimated of 21% of the Roma children were enrolled in school and that the percentage of early education leavers is estimated between 79% and 82% among Roma children [4]. In 2009, a study from Belgium [10] shows that 60% of the Roma boys and 75% of the Roma girls have absenteeism problems in secondary school.

The fourth important aspect regards *the situation of segregated schools and classes and the overrepresentation of Roma children in "special" schooling*. Reports on Roma education from UK [11], [12] indicate that Roma children "tend to be concentrated in schools with below average results" [11] and that the main barrier for Roma in accessing school is poverty [12]. A recent cross-national survey [27] shows that in Hungary, Romania, Macedonia, and Moldova, more than 20% of Roma students attended segregated schools. In Slovakia and Bulgaria, this share exceeded 30%. A recent study presented by the Roma Educational Fund estimated that between 13% and 45% of Roma children from Romania study in segregated schools [14]. According to a 2012 survey [27], the shares of Roma aged 7 to 15 attending special schools (not including special classes) exceeded 5% in Hungary, Serbia, and Croatia, and 10% in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. A statistically significant decline in the shares of Roma attending these schools during 2004-2011 was noted in the Czech Republic—from 25% to 17%.

The general perception is that the parents of the Roma children are to blame for the current status of their children's school involvement. Nevertheless, a very recent study [20] showed that this is just a stereotype and only 9% of the Roma parents fit this pattern, while 90% of them show appreciation and positive attitudes towards their children's education.

Instead, the real barriers for the educational inclusion of Roma children are poverty and discrimination.

III. ROMANIAN POLICIES TARGETING ROMA EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION. APPROACH, MAIN OBJECTIVES AND DIRECTIONS

As stated earlier, since the end of the 1990, the development of Romanian policies addressed to social inclusion of Roma residents took place in three stages. The third and the last stage, started in 2001, with the first Roma targeted strategy - the Strategy of the Government of Romania for improving the condition of the Roma [15]. The document was elaborated through the collaboration of various governmental and non-governmental structures from Romania and with significant assistance from international institutions, especially within the EU.

The initial structure of the strategy comprised ten main directions for action: community development and public administration, housing, social security, health, economy, public justice and order, child protection, education, cults and culture, communication and civic participation [15]. The action plan of the strategy was revised in 2006.

After a decade from the initial strategy, in 2011, the Romanian Government, in line with the European requirements and recommendations [1], launched the new targeted strategy called The Romanian Government Strategy for the Inclusion of Romanian Citizens from Roma Minority

for the period 2012-2020 (SNIR) [16]. The main purpose of the revised strategy is to “ensure the social and economic inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to Roma minority, by implementing integrated policies in the fields of education, employment, health, housing, culture and social infrastructure” [16, p. 13].

The strategy creates a general national framework for the development of targeted programs and measures to address the specific challenges faced by the Roma population in their process of social inclusion, challenges that were defined by the strategy as “opportunity gaps” [16, p. 6]. These gaps can be categorized into four main groups [22]: *low access to public services* (education, health care), *low access to public utilities* (housing, living conditions), *discrimination*, and *high dependency on the social welfare system* (social benefits). A viable response to all these challenges can be provided only through an integrated approach, which synchronizes the public and private sectors’ efforts and combines resources from both. The Romanian SNIR for 2012-2020 uses this specific approach, defining the general priorities for intervention.

The Strategy places Education at the top of its priorities, defining two main objectives for this area [16, p. 16]:

(1) *Ensuring equal, free and universal access of Romanian citizens belonging to Roma minority to quality education at all levels in the public education system, in order to support economic growth and the development of the knowledge-based society.*

(2) *Promoting inclusive education in the education system, including by preventing and eliminating segregation and by fighting against discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, social status, disabilities or any other criteria which affects the children and the young people belonging to disadvantaged groups, including the Roma people.*

Our further analysis will focus the specific directions for action proposed by the Strategy to support the achievement of these objectives. Based on previously collected feed-back (compiled from surveys, reports, critical analyses and evaluations) regarding the progress registered by each direction, we will evaluate the role of different factors that contributed to the public acknowledgement of its value, so far. There are seventeen directions defined in total, most of them presenting some degree of complementarity to each other.

The first step in our analysis was to categorize them based on an objective criterion: the beneficiary group they targeted.

A corresponding number of four categories resulted (Table I): (1) targeted on Roma students, (2) targeted on the system and / or the community, (3) targeted on the teachers and/ or other specialist and (4) targeted on Roma parents.

This categorization allows us to identify the redundancies and gaps among all directions. For example, while directions 4 and 8 and, respectively, directions 12, 13 and 14 refer to similar activities for the same target groups, there is no direction covering important topics, some more specific, like school access for children in isolated rural areas, and others more general, like the division of responsibilities between different governmental institutions/ agencies and the private sector.

TABLE I
ROMANIAN SNIR DIRECTIONS, BY TARGET GROUP

Target group	Direction no.	Direction description
Roma students	1	<i>Special programs designed to increase the access to early education</i>
	2	<i>“After-school” programs dedicated to children in schools</i>
	3	<i>“Second chance” programs addressed to children and young people who dropped out of school before finishing compulsory education</i>
	4	<i>Programs designed to stimulate school participation and reduce absenteeism</i>
	5	<i>“Special places” in high schools and universities for Roma students</i>
	6	<i>Teaching of Romani language at all levels of secondary education where there is sufficient demand for it</i>
	8	<i>Counselling, guiding and tutoring activities</i>
	The system / The community	7
9		<i>A system for collecting and monitoring data concerning the enrollment of all preschool and school-age children in a form of education</i>
10		<i>Harmonizing and completing the system which ensures a quality education, focusing on the management of inclusive education</i>
17		<i>Partnerships between the Education Ministry, school inspectorates and educational establishments, with NGOs and representatives of the Roma minority</i>
The teachers / Other specialists		11
	12	<i>Restructuring the initial training of teachers - subjects related to promotion of diversity in schools and in society</i>
	13	<i>Training courses for teachers in the field of inclusive education, intercultural education and multiculturalism</i>
	14	<i>Training programs for teachers who work in kindergartens and schools with children belonging to Roma minority</i>
	15	<i>Training programs for school mediators</i>
The parents	16	<i>Programs and activities for parental education and encouraging the participation of the Roma parents in the education process within and outside the school</i>

Table II presents a synthesized overview of the acknowledgment by the experts and public opinion [14], [17], [18], [19], of progress registered so far in the implementation of each direction, conjugated with the pre-existence of similar initiatives in the at national level and the degree of involvement of each sector, as compared to the other:

The overview shows a lack of homogeneity in the outcomes generated so far by each of these directions, the two main elements that seem to generate it consisting in (1) the pre-existence of similar initiatives at national level and (2) the level of involvement shown by the public sector.

TABLE II
LEVEL OF PROGRESS REGISTERED SO FAR BY EACH DIRECTION AND
POTENTIALLY INFLUENCING FACTORS

Direction no.	Level of progress	Pre-existence of similar initiatives	Public involv.	Private involv.
1	Un-Acknowledged	No	Low	High
2	Un-Acknowledged	No	Low	High
3	Acknowledged	Yes	High	Low
4	Un-acknowledged	No	Low	High
5	Acknowledged	Yes	High	Low
6	Acknowledged	Yes	High	Low
7	Un-acknowledged	Yes	Low	High
8	Un-acknowledged	No	Low	High
9	Un-acknowledged	No	Low	Low
10	Un-acknowledged	No	Low	Low
11	Acknowledged	Yes	High	Low
12	Acknowledged	No	High	Low
13	Acknowledged	No	High	High
14	Acknowledged	No	High	High
15	Acknowledged	Yes	High	Low
16	Acknowledged	No	High	High
17	Un-acknowledged	No	High	High

Thus, in the case of directions 3, 5, 6, 11 and 15, the acknowledgement of progress is evaluated based on both pre-existing similar actions (eq. the affirmative measure of allocating “special places” for Roma exists since 1992, currently the annual state budget allocating 3.000 special places for admission to high school and approximately 500 special places for admission to university for Roma people) and on a high level of public sector involvement (eq. 50 new Romani teachers and 30-60 new school mediators are being trained each year [18]).

All the other directions with acknowledged progress (directions 12, 13, 14, and 16), even if not preceded by similar actions at national level, know a high level of involvement of the public sector in their implementation (eq. the changes in the national accreditation requirements for university programs; the creation of the “Multi-annual National Training Program for Non-Roma Teachers Working with Roma Children and Students” etc.).

Among the directions with low progress recognition, we can find three categories:

- directions with no pre-existing similar measures and a low level of involvement from both sectors (the case of directions 9 and 10); in their case, the lack of acknowledgement of progress is explainable;
- one direction with pre-existing similar measures, a high level of involvement of private sector and a low level of involvement of public sector (the case of direction 7); this is a special situation, since the pre-existing measure refers to a Minister order from 2007 forbidding segregation in schools, which is not appropriately implemented, nor very well known in Romanian schools [18]. Moreover, the newly promoted Educational Law (2011) has no specific provisions regarding school segregation of Roma children, so the lack of acknowledgement of progress for this measure is also understandable;
- directions with no pre-existing similar initiatives, a low public sector involvement and a high level of involvement

of the private sector (the case of directions 1, 2, 4, 8 and 17). This is also the most interesting case of all, since it shows that services and programs developed by the private sector (often through external financing), although extremely useful to the Roma population are not as valued as the public programs, possibly because of their lack of sustainability over time.

IV. WHAT MAKES A STRATEGY “GOOD”? WHAT MAKES IT “VIABLE”? LESSONS DRAWN FROM THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL POLICY TARGETING THE ROMA POPULATION

Summing up the previous observations, it becomes obvious that the Romanian SNIR, as a strategy document, represents an important step towards the improvement of the educational situation of Roma people.

Its strongest points relate to a high level of compatibility with the EU Framework for National Roma integration strategies, the elaboration of policies in consultation with the private sector (especially representatives of Roma community), the undertaking of financing some of the most important programs for school reforms, and the continuation of previously tested measures that have proven their success and efficiency in enhancing educational inclusion of Roma children.

Its deficiencies, though, can be found both at the level of its structure and its content.

About the structure, the presence of some inconsistencies and redundancies has been mentioned before. One could also add an observation regarding the lack of an organized action plan in order to implement the proposed solutions. Without such a plan, the chances of fulfilling the assumed directions are thin. The action plan should be created through a joint effort of the governmental institutions in partnership with the civil society. The involvement of NGO’s, Roma communities’ formal and informal leaders, practitioners and academics would add to the action plan a more realistic perspective, thus rendering its measures more effective and beneficiary-oriented. Such an action plan should also consider and stipulate a series of other dimensions that could increase its viability: sources of financing, timetables for actions’ completion, desired outcomes and monitoring instruments. Also, the creation of national, regional and local database and a system of monitoring children’s school attendance, absenteeism and risk of drop-out is mandatory.

Moreover, the lack of a clear division of tasks among the public and the private sector brings with it, as observed earlier, un-equal involvement of the two parties and thus delays in the achievement of estimated outcomes.

As about the content of the strategy, our analysis revealed that a potentially successful strategy should be based on previously tested measures and, when new measures are introduced, specific implementing and monitoring bodies should be appointed, in order to ensure the correct management of these measures.

Moreover, the long term goals of a successful and viable strategy should be supplemented with short term objectives, addressed to providing solutions to the immediate needs of the target group. For example, a long term objective related to

tackling discrimination and promoting diversity in schools should be closely related to a short term solution for providing more adapted incentives to support disadvantaged children during their schooling period. Also a firm legislative framework for eliminating school segregation, with clear sanctions, should be urgently implemented, since the ambiguity of the present legislation doubled by the lack of its enforcement in schools, still creates the appropriate context for segregation and discrimination to continue.

During this time-frame, an extremely important aspect is to make the best use of the alternative funding resources (as for example the EU Structural Funds), in order to improve school material conditions and train teachers for a more inclusive approach of the educational process.

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